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Considering Games and Gamification in Libraries & Associated Entities — Surely, You Can't Be Serious: When Library Folk Go Game

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Just Try Not to Die

The looming timer on the wall confirms what the disembodied voice just told you. You have less than 10 minutes left. You and your associates have spent the better part of the last hour working your way through a series of puzzles scattered across the room and numerous cryptic numbers and words scrawled on the walls. You have frantically ransacked the room looking for clues to the key that will release you from this room before — before — something terrible happens....

If you have not already treated yourself (and a group of curious friends) to the escape room phenomenon, you are missing a mind stretching / nail biting experience. *Market Watch*¹ calls this multiplayer endeavor in which players solve a series of puzzles and riddles using clues, hints and strategy “part game, part theater, part team-building exercise.” *Geek and Sundry*² says “the most literal definition of an escape room is a game which requires players to escape from imprisonment by exploiting their surroundings.” The kicker is that these objectives are in a room into which you and your hapless friends have been “locked/trapped.” Fail to solve the puzzles, riddles, and mysteries within the allotted time limit (usually 60) minutes, and you are all “murdered” or “blown up” or “suffocated” or “ripped apart by zombies” or “sucked out of an airlock.” Sometimes you are merely playing for the fate of humanity or a small subset thereof (who will subsequently die of disease, or irradiated, or eaten by zombies if you fail). More amazing still is that you actually pay someone money to be locked into a room with a ticking time bomb (it’s even a lucrative business).² How cool is that?

Now think about this: Players use knowledge and/or skill with knowledge (possibly retrieved from a primary or secondary source) to find clues to find more knowledge to solve problems? Does this not have “library” written all over it?

Type in “escape rooms” and “libraries” into Google and sit back. Now that is cool. Libraries have been keen to creatively apply the puzzle solving and information gathering attributes of the escape room concept to comparable skills needed to use library resources. So, it is no mystery why escape rooms in public and academic libraries are the latest hot library outreach, promotion and instruction thing. To coin a phrase they are HUGE. The February issue of *College and Research Libraries News*³ has a story on how librarians and a faculty member at the **University of Albany, SUNY** have designed and implemented an escape room immersive game platform in an information literacy class. Many other library publications (*Library Quarterly*;⁴ *American Libraries*;⁵ *School Library Journal*⁶) have all recently featured articles on the library application of escape rooms, and there are countless blogs and websites on how to bring the concept to your library (See *library lady nicole* blog manual on the subject).⁷ Your only problems will be how to fit this into your normal “game night” schedule and how to store all those props among your game collections.

Just as surely as there is a gamified world, libraries have become places transformed by games and a place for gaming the transformation (see what I did there?). This should not be surprising, considering the recent history of libraries and games — particularly board games. Ok, while no one is looking I challenge you to type the following terms into Google: *board*, *game*, and *public library*. My last such search retrieved almost three million results. That is just board games and public libraries. These hits mostly include circulating board game collections, board game outreach programs, ALA roundtables on board (tabletop) games,

and also a great many bars and pubs who have their own library of board games. For those non-bartenders and non-public librarians out there who may think that the game of *Monopoly* defines board games, you may be forgiven (just this once) for wondering surely how the whole phenomenon of games and gamification has — and is — transforming libraries and the world, and when did games become so...well...serious.

I am serious. And don't call me Shirley. (Sorry, I couldn't help myself.)

Back in olden times, (before the 1980s) when games were thought to be mere trifling pastimes, perhaps a librarian named Shirley (or a librarian who knew someone named Shirley) was the first to host a game night at her public library — in the children's section of course. Because, sure, playtime in the library was okay some of the time, but only in public libraries in the children's section. Surely, Shirley had no idea what a spectacular precedent she had set. But, born that night was probably the biggest library outreach concept since the bookmobile.

Games in the library — at least in public libraries — are now as ubiquitous as computer stations and story time. What could be more normal than a game night in a public library? The sight of tweens and teens gathered around screens of *Mario Kart*, or *Dance Dance Revolution* or *Guitar Hero* in a public library game night is now common as is those same young people (and even older folks) huddled around board game tables playing *Settlers of Catan*, *Ticket to Ride*, or *Pandemic*. In fact increased group participation in video games and the new renaissance in board games has dramatically fueled the idea of libraries as community spaces.

Games themselves are serious business. Video games alone generated over \$108 billion in revenues in 2017.⁸ Sales in board games in the U.S grew by 28% between spring of 2016 and spring of 2017 and global sales was \$9.6 billion in 2016.⁹ Indeed, the new resurgence in board games has been labeled a board game renaissance. Some of the games themselves have become serious as learning and training tools in all areas of business and industry. Basically a “serious game” is a game “designed for a primary purpose other than pure entertainment.” It has allowed trainers and educators to embrace the potential for games to engage and simulate risk and reality, without the risk of reality. It is “play” for a productive purpose. As a section of the site for the MIT Game Lab¹⁰ puts it, “Modern games have brought the power of play to many endeavors — from entertainment to education, art to activism, science to socialization, and more.”

This revolution is not seen just in the proliferation of games themselves (both digital and analog). *Gamification* — the process of adding games or game-like elements to something (such as a task) so as to encourage participation — has immersed the planet in a ubiquitous social “game think.” So, to some extent gamification is the concept of adding “a spoonful of sugar” to help the medicine go down. But, the terms “engagement” and “participation” are critical. Far from just making a task more palatable, gamification incorporates an entire system of elements and principles that both encourages and compels a user. Behavior manipulation sounds a bit harsh. So, let's just refer to it as user centered instruction engagement. It is an engagement application that libraries are particularly placed to absorb and use to their advantage. In fact libraries seem to have benefited particularly from this alluring game revolution that has swept society.

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What do you mean, we don't need no stinkin' badges?

Academic libraries in both K-12 and higher education have adapted games and gamification instruction for learner/user engagement to enhance their traditional library role of supporting faculty teaching and student learning. From actual problem solving games to gamification badges and incentives, academic libraries are finding that using games and gaming is a very effective way to introduce and teach research and information literacy skills normally taught in bibliographic instruction lecture format. Did I mention badges? Because everyone wants badges.

I trust you have now assimilated the *raison d'être* of this column — how and why libraries have become enmeshed in the game / gamification milieu. Yet, while we shall certainly dig deeper into how game based learning (GBL) and gamification are transforming libraries, we shall consider as well those entities and agents that are concurrently entangled in this transformation including the field of education, the game industry itself, and print publishers. Think from Edutopia¹¹ and serious gaming¹² to book apps. Interactive multimedia and book apps are just a small step away from merging with gaming and gamification anyway. Indeed, it may not be long until all things merge into the one grand unified game entity. Of course, by then we may finally be under the authority of our robot overlords, and our worries will be over. Until then, I look forward to taking my badges and this column into the gamification maelstrom. 🌪

Jared Seay is an old school board gamer/tinkerer, reference librarian, Director of Media Collections, and general nice guy at the Addlestone Library at the College of Charleston. He has a degree in media production from Illinois State University and in library and information science from the University of South Carolina. He has utilized games with faculty for classroom learning and library bibliographic instruction and promotion. His gaming events have included a giant Risk board, a giant Diplomacy board, and a giant Wits and Wagers board (there seems to be a pattern here). He is currently working on applying games and gamification to online learning, designing a library escape room, and building a TARDIS.

Endnotes

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10. "What is a serious game?" *Growth Engineering*, <http://www.growthengineering.co.uk/what-are-serious-games/>.
11. "Exploring the potential of play." *MIT Game Lab*, <http://gamelab.mit.edu/about/>.
12. *Edutopia*, George Lucas Educational Foundation, <https://www.edutopia.org/>.

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loves doing her **Q & A** column for *Against the Grain*. Hooray! **Lolly** loves questions! **Leah Hinds** is crafting a form so you can send your questions directly to us at *Against the Grain*! Stay tuned.

Scott the bam zowie Plutchak has started a new column in *Against the Grain*! He is an Epistemologist, the one in this issue (also serving as our **Op Ed**, see p.32) is awesome. **Scott** is not scared to buck the system. Whoa, **Scott**!

Another new columnist is **Corey Seeman** who has started a business slant column. His column in the last issue was about the necessity of snow-plows in a place like Charleston which almost never has snow. Like my father an econ professor used to tell me — "You can't have guns and butter." **Welcome Corey!** And **Corey** was just in Charleston visiting his mother!

Another new columnist — **Jared Seay**. Remember his earlier columns "**You Gotta Go to School for that?**" Well he has now started a column about games and libraries. What a guy! (p.58)

Reading **Social Media (ATG NewsChannel)** by **Nancy K. Herther** brought back memories of my very first IBM selectric typewriter with the self-correcting feature. There was only one such IBM typewriter in the library and I got it when the old owner left for a new job. Hooray! What an ancient memory!

The hard-working **Steve Oberg** just keynoted a library conference in **Cleveland**, and he has made his slides available at <http://librarylink.wheaton.edu/notsl2018>. Check them out!

Bloomsbury has announced the news of the acquisition of **I.B. Tauris Publishers**. This acquisition comes as **Bloomsbury's Academic division** kicks off a year of celebrations for their **10th anniversary** this May, and will strengthen **Bloomsbury's** commitment to serve the scholarly community with original, cutting-edge content. www.bloomsbury.com

President-elect of **SSP 2018-19** is **Angela Cochran** the associate publisher and director of journals for the **American Society of Civil Engineers** in Reston, Virginia USA. **ASCE** publishes 36 technical journals across all areas of civil engineering. Prior to becoming journals director, **Angela** was the production director at **ASCE** overseeing all production aspects of journals, a monthly member magazine, and book products. She is past-president of the **Council of Science Editors** and a regular contributor and associate editor of *The Scholarly Kitchen*. **SSP** new Members-at-Large include: 1) **Alison Mudditt**, the recently-appointed CEO of **PLOS**. Her current focus is on defining the next innovative frontier for **PLOS**. She is also a contributor to *The Scholarly Kitchen* blog and serves on the board of directors of **ALPSP** and the Advisory Board for the **Authors' Alliance**. Before joining **PLOS**, she served as director of the **University of California Press** and Executive Vice President at **SAGE**. Her 30-year publishing career also includes leadership roles at **Blackwell** and **Taylor & Francis**. 2) **Laura Ricci**, senior product manager for partnerships in the **EBSCO eBooks** division, where she has had multiple roles since joining the company in 2013. 3) **Elizabeth R. Lorbeer** began her role as the library director for **Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine (WMed)** in 2013. Additionally, she is a board member of the **Medical**

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